

Women's Studies 110: An Introduction to Systems of Class, Race, and Gender Oppression  
An Honors Thesis by  
Sarah Voyles  
December 20, 2004  
Dr. Kim L. Jones-Owen, Advisor

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## Abstract

My honors thesis project is a culmination of my education in philosophy and women's studies. The goals of my project were to create curriculum that would give undergraduate students information about the systems of race class and gender oppression as well as a framework to analyze from and gain an understanding of liberating educational theory. I wanted to build an introductory level course that could fulfill University Core Curriculum requirements and give a basic understanding of how diversity developed our modern society. To achieve my goals I engaged in an extensive review of early to modern critical pedagogy literature from Paulo Friere and Henry A. Giroux to bell hooks and dozens of educators practicing and reflecting on pedagogical practices. I also reviewed undergraduate class, race, and gender course syllabi and texts commonly used in American universities. My results were the development of a Women's Studies 110: Class, Race, and Gender Systems of Oppression course schedule, guidelines, and assignments as well as a brief review of how, pedagogically speaking, the course is to be taught to best suit Ball State's campus. Ball State has specific institutional and infrastructural challenges to the democratization of knowledge, but there is hope for transformation that can start by an introductory women's studies diversity course as it gives radical information and methodology for change.

## Acknowledgements

The late June Jordan inspires me to remember why I chose my thesis project. She reflects in the introduction to her book *Some of Us Did Not Die*:

I got to thinking about how some of us choose to remember, and why, and how: why we do not forget. And I got to thinking about the moral meaning of memory, per se. And what it means to forget, what it means to fail to find and preserve the connections with the dead whose lives you, or I, want or need to honor with our own. (5)

It is in the memory of the women who founded the Ball State Women's Studies Program, feminists and educators of all generations who allowed me to pass gracefully through my undergraduate career, inspired by writings that echoed my frustration with and hope for our oppressive world.

In particular, my mentor and advisor Dr. Kim Jones-Owen lovingly helped to guide my consciousness to depths of understanding I will appreciate the rest of my life. Additionally, Dr. Juli Eflin and Ms. Julee Rosser provided me with as much academic, feminist, and moral support as I needed, enthusiastically and authentically in every class, office discussion and phone conversation over my five years at Ball State University.

To these great Ball State women and the greatest mentor and educator I've ever met, my mother, I dedicate my honors thesis.

## Women's Studies 110: Systems of Oppression,

### A Study of Critical Pedagogy and Feminist Integration in the Ball State Classroom

"This is the oppressor's language

yet I need it to talk to you." Adrienne Rich from *The Burning of Paper Instead of Children*

Even in this introduction I am limited to how I can communicate my knowledge and experience by what and most importantly *how* I was taught. The dual consciousness of my limitation and hope, isolation and connection pushes my mind between fear and excitement. It is the fact that I feel and analyze simultaneously which compels me to inspire others to educate, and thus liberate themselves. I begin with my feelings, analysis and communication of both to say that I LIVE! And therefore, I feel a moral obligation to help spread the documentation of Truth – Liberating, Democratizing, and Pluralistic as Truth is. Yet I work, as my cultural predecessors and successors, against the grain in an increasingly isolating world. The fact that I am another white, middle class, formally educated woman engaging in course design and education attests to the beginning stages of civilization in which my culture exists.

As I sat in class after class I had the disheartening realization that my sense of fairness and value of democracy was not reflected in most any educational institution or classmate I encountered. It was the few rare like-minded individuals who questioned authorities of

knowledge and power who help me pursue my attempt at unifying and employing feminist theory, ethics, and method to continue the dialog about liberation and the dialog about dialog. The goal of my dialog is to exercise my sense of fairness and compassion.

The democratization of knowledge challenges modern education to engage in pedagogy; the act of teaching for explicit political purposes. Critical Pedagogy theory was developed by educators in Mexico, South America, and North America starting in the 1980s and continues to build. Paulo Freire theorizes modern education as oppression. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire describes how the oppressor (teacher) claims to have privileged knowledge of a particular subject and believes that knowledge is transferred to students by exposition and not critical engagement of the class and subject. The effect is that knowledge is thought to simply be deposited from educator to the educated. Freire argues that oppression leads to a submersion of consciousness and a false perception of reality. Freire believes, rather, that true

Educational practice further involves processes, techniques, expectation, desires, frustrations, and the ongoing tension between practice and theory, between freedom and authority where any exaggerated emphasis on either is unacceptable from a democratic perspective, which is incompatible with authoritarianism and permissiveness alike. (241)

To say this now is slightly less radical then it was 20 years ago when Freire first published critical educational theory. Given the context of a “multiplicity of circumstances that conspired against concrete possibilities of transformation,” postmodern deconstruction, and emphasis on technology, education theory had previously been providing a “reductionist discourse of despair” (Hernandez 2).

Finally educational theorizing came to address the inherent power relationships in the transfer of knowledge in all contexts. Henry A. Giroux offered the conception of educators concerned with pedagogy and cultural politics as “cultural workers” who were to engage in a reformation of all spheres of cultural production to create an authentic democratic citizenship (Giroux 242). Critical pedagogy is thus founded on a reconceptualization of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres. Fundamental to the definition and preservation of those distinct spheres is language, since language is always a guiding framework we use to understand and evaluate knowledge. Additionally, language is always enacted in a particular time and place which governs how private issues are defined as what you do not want others to know and not to be obliged to keep them out of public discussion all together. Individuals never simply receive a complete ready-made language, rather their active participation in language where the community inevitably translates private concerns into public issues. When language reinforces the public/private distinction certain patters of hegemony are reinforced. Language and education as dialog is an act of transformation of consciousness as it is an act of power. Pedagogy focuses on the role of agency, transformation of self and community simultaneously. Embracing is internal and communicative conflict, the process of negotiation of power takes in consideration both social determination and choice (Hernandez 15).

To merge our distinction of public and private would mean to shift politics to include and recognize content, value, symbols, myths, and rituals which women have developed in the course of their existence in society. The ‘public’ redefined most simply as a space for common discourse necessarily assumes there can be a multiplicity of publics and gives collective empowerment. Pedagogy, therefore, provides an alternate moral discourse that can expose

domination and oppression while encouraging the construction of emancipatory social identities, thus creating democracy (Hernandez 26).

Educators must engage in new language as well as teach about how language and communication and knowledge are intricately linked to the expression of power, dominance, morality, and politics. By never remaining silent and engaging in multiple discourses in the classroom, we could define the wider educational goal of the university as Hernandez does

in terms of making students critical thinkers, democracy narrows the scope pointing to the need for providing students with the opportunity to develop a sense of agency framed by ethical terms such as justice, solidarity, and community. This means to empower students not only in order to understand their positions, experiences, stories, and voices within the complexity of society, but also to be able to produce alternative responses that escape binary oppositions and contribute to the development of communities of solidarity. (82)

Students must, however, take their responsibility in the educational process. To do so exposes the politics of knowledge production (and thus communication). To engage in multiplicities of articulated through individual context and experience completely refutes the authoritarian structured classroom and curriculum, as well as the division of public, private, social, personal, political, and ethical spheres.

We cannot, as bell hooks points out, simply replace one dictatorship of knowing for another. The internal and external conflict created by engaging in critical dialog need to be mediated by passion; the passion of expression, passion of remembrance, using hook's phrase, the "passion of experience" (hooks 90). During open discussions students usually connect to and evaluate the course content in the form of personal narratives of memory. hooks addresses the

particular kind of knowledge gained from suffering to illustrate the importance of the passion of experience and memory. She states, “It (knowledge from suffering) is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience (hooks 91). As students speak through their inscribed memories and connect themselves to systems of oppression, the atmosphere of class gatherings changes. Many times in Women’s Studies classes the most hopeful sessions are the ones in which students’ memories of suffering connect them in a larger sense to humanity and oppression. Often this shift in class dynamic reveals a competition of voices, dismissal of feelings, and silences. Providing a forum for the free exchange of ideas and challenging students to take multiple locations to gather and analyze knowledge demands an instructor who can facilitate critical interrogation of beliefs rather than allowing dismissal because of varying personal experience within systems of class, race, and gender oppression.

It may be asked, “Why would students, or educators, choose to engage in such an intellectual and emotional struggle?” Speaking from my Ball State experiences, I believe as Freire and most cultural workers, that the freedom-seeking human spirit is ignited through the material and method of radical democracy, as hard as it may be, to make sense of *why* they are oppressed and how to change it. To hooks even just the act of striving to grasp is a way of knowing that is a worthy goal (hooks 91). In addition, Adriana Hernandez frames the challenges of the critical classroom

Neither around issues of clarity and verification, which are traditional hegemonic criteria that control the production of knowledge within the University setting, nor within the terms of particular anti-intellectual tendencies in the academy that dismiss theoretical work. Rather, I concentrate on the communicative dynamic



and the politics of the representational practices that take place when theory is distributed within the university setting. (80)

If the classroom is reconceived of in Hernandez's words as a "site for struggle," the process of change is necessarily one of discontinuity, rupture, evaluation, and continuity (Hernandez 83). Creating a sight for struggle on Ball State's campus is thus largely challenged by the greater ideological foundations of language as well as the authoritarian patterns of educators and students.

In the fall of 2003 I had the opportunity to serve as an observer of an Introduction to Women's Studies 210 course taught by Ms. Julee Rosser. From the semester's beginning I used my observations to clarify my understanding of diversity and pedagogical challenges to the Ball State University classroom. My consciousness as a student, theorizer, and potential educator aided my identification of six specific challenges to Ball State; hegemony and homogeneity of the undergraduate population, medium school size, the atmosphere of a "suitcase campus," increasing student/teacher ratios, lack of diverse faculty, and a general lack of funding of the social sciences.

Firstly, Ball State's undergraduate student body is largely white, middle class, and from small to medium rural Indiana towns. In general these students come from a homogeneous socio-economic background as well as obtain information from the same popular media sources, which leads them to hold relatively similar sets of ethical beliefs, ways of knowing, and method for justifying their knowledge. This homogeny often creates a stagnant learning environment as students agree with one another's personal observations, evaluations, and stereotypes. An anti-authoritarian women's studies classroom must create a site for struggle even if students are uncomfortable exploring the politics of difference. The discussion guidelines I've included in

the Course Description are a physical starting point to help create a community of Frierian “Truth Seekers.”

Existing as a medium sized university Ball State attracts commuters and requires on-campus undergraduates to own a vehicle. A lack of adequate transportation infrastructure gives the feeling of a “suitcase campus,” or a campus where a large percentage of the student body leaves for home on the weekends. Obviously, without consistent communication, the Ball State campus is disjointed and isolating. It is difficult enough to cover the required curriculum, let alone start a unique social environment to foster community when students are not active with one another outside of the classroom. Small spaces such as the Women’s Studies Program and on-campus social activist groups begin to support community building and outside community events should be promoted in class through regular announcements and flyers. There are exciting opportunities to engage social movements at Ball State, but sustainability of the community is the greatest challenge to critical pedagogy. The course design and pedagogical method I advocate is specifically designed to create and sustain Ball State’s and Muncie’s liberating communities.

Traditionally the social sciences are under-funded. Ball State is no exception, as evident by the fact that there is only a Women’s Studies *Program* and not department. Lack of funding propagates the homogenous student as well as faculty population. Diversity is constantly challenged by a lack of funds and requires creativity and persistence. Often larger class sizes, especially in core curriculum courses, increase student to teacher ratios which poses communication difficulties. To cope, instructors during my time often tried to rely more heavily on authoritarian class structures (such as stringent attendance policies and most class points earned from exams) and rote memorization of course material. A critical pedagogy requires

professors to get to know students and *how* they know and therefore basic get-to-know-you sheets should be utilized in this course. Also, dialog about dialog should not ever be excluded from class discussions and the course evaluations during weeks 5 and 13 are designed to help the instructor and students assess their learning process.

While the text I have chosen will undoubtedly have become outdated when this course is taught, the readings were selected to present a range of cultural experiences within our country and systems of oppression as well as kinds of writings analyzing those systems. Students are required to bring a discussion prompt which should be collected by the instructor at the beginning of the class to encourage reading of the materials and to help indicate students' interpretation of the new information. Additionally, my course design gives fluid guidelines for teaching an introductory to systems of oppression course and should be adapted to the context in which it will be taught. Instructors should be familiar with critical pedagogy literature including personal assessments from educators expounded upon in such books as the *Feminist Teacher Anthology*, *Anti-Racism, Feminism, and Critical Approaches to Education*, *Teaching Against the Grain*, among others listed in my bibliography and list of suggested readings. Extensive review of the literature relieves part of the isolation that often comes with resistance education. Most importantly, these personal accounts of teaching critically to create democracy build the foundation of resistance to oppression as well as specific techniques every educator can employ. Sustaining the community created in the liberating classroom requires constant hope and dedication. Demonstrating and propagating hope on Ball State's campus through attempts at democratizing the educational process is the next step in creating a truly informed, engaged, and diverse college campus.

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## **Course Description**

Introduction to Systems of Oppression Women's Studies 110 (WMNST 110) is an introductory investigation into an analysis of class, race, and gender systems and how each is governed by oppression.

## **Required Text**

Rothenberg, Paula S. *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1997.

## **Course Objectives**

1. Recognize transformative properties of education.
2. Gain a proper historical and cultural context for understanding systems of oppression.
3. Connect broader definitions with events in students' personal experiences.
4. Learn introductory research skills to be able to efficiently and effectively find valuable information.
5. Learn and find creative, non-violent solutions to oppression.
6. Help students identify their framework and a method to support and critically analyze knowledge claims and beliefs about systems of oppression.

## **General Guidelines**

1. Regular attendance is required. No more than 3 undocumented absences.

Excused absences will be made according to documentation for medical, career, or extenuating circumstances only. 24 hour notice of absence is expected.

2. All readings are to be completed **BEFORE** class begins. 1 question or comment is to be prepared (written out to be turned in) to prompt class discussion and will be used to take attendance. You will be called on if you are not participating in class discussions.
3. Please sit in a circle formation as the shape encourages every voice to speak and be heard.
4. Speak from experiences, but please do not speak to represent all members of a culture.
5. Do not ask someone else to speak for or represent an entire group of people.
6. Do not sit passively through your education. Listen intently and contribute your voice.
7. If you need adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, please contact me as soon as possible.

## **Grading**

Attendance: 20 Points Total

-5 Points/Unexcused Absence past #3

Assignments: 1. Resources for List 20 pts

2. Resources Paper 40 pts

3. Journal 60 pts

4. Art 60pts

180 pts Total

Exams: 1. Test #1 25 pts

2. Midterm Exam 25pts

3. Test #3 25pts

4. Final Exam 25pts

100 pts Total

Total: 300 Points      90%= 270-300      60%= 180-209

80%= 240-269      50%= 130-179

70%= 210-239

Extra Credit: Up to one letter grade, or 30 points Total, up to 10 points/extra assignment

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## **Assignments**

### **Independent Resources Short Paper**

The purpose of this assignment is for the student to locate and evaluate 2 educational resources to support or defeat the claim:

“In the United States of America mass oppression is present and maintained through integrated systems and institutions based on race, class, and gender.”

#### **Types of Media Accepted:**

One Resource From:

- Academic Journals
- Books, Compilations, Reference, Scholarly non-fiction

Required Text is not acceptable.

One Resource From:

Online Tools

- Relevant Databases
- Research Engines
- Online Magazines (Absolutely NO popular media/news)
- Fact Sheets

Must be .org/.gov/.edu, if you find a .com you want to use please ok it with me.

You will be asked to turn in your potential resources before the final draft if due. Each resource will be reviewed by the instructor and is worth 10 points each, 20 points Total.

Write a short paper (2-3pgs) answering the questions:

1. When was the information published or updated?
2. Where did the information come from? Who funded the research/web site?
3. Who is the intended audience?
4. How can one use the resource? How useful is the resource? Is the language easy to understand?

40 points Total

Paper is to be MLA formatted

### Journal of Struggles

Keep a journal for a minimum of five consecutive days documenting and reacting to three situations where a power differential is observed. Examples include a time when you felt intimidated, inferior, superior, or power over something/someone. You must have been a participant in the situation, not merely an observer. Potential environments to observe are the workplace, home, family gatherings, shopping centers etc.

Writing Assignment (4-6 pgs):

1. Identify who, where, when, what happened
2. Speculate about reasons for the power inequality (status, privilege, race, class, gender?)
3. Describe your reaction to what happened, what feelings you had during the interaction
4. Connect each event to course material or an outside work of art (3 references minimum)

60 points Total

Paper is to be MLA formatted

Art and our New World

Find one piece of art that you feel helps envision and create the culture you want to help build. Write an explanation (2-3 pgs) of why you chose the piece, what the piece reflects and means (to you), and how the piece envisions the culture you want to create (25 pts).

Each student will present the art they chose (a photo, audio/video clip etc. is acceptable and requires approval) as well as their explanation for five to seven minutes (25 pts).

Acceptable Media:

Visual – painting, photograph, sculpture, pottery, weavings, digital image etc.

Audio – music of any genre

Video – movie clip, documentary

50 pts Total

### Extra Credit

Find a piece of art that reflects one of the class readings. Write a one page explanation of what you think the art reflects and why it connects to the reading. Up to 10 points possible.

## **Course Schedule**

### **I. The Social Construction of Difference**

- Week 1 M Course Introduction – Handout Syllabus and Race, Class, Gender Exercise
- W Read Part I Introduction p.7-12, Racial Formation p.13-22, and The Ethics of Living Jim Crow p. 23-31
- F Rethinking Women’s Biology p.32-33, The Social Construction of Gender p.33-45
- Week 2 M **No Class**
- W The Social Construction of Sexuality p.52-54, The Invention of Heterosexuality p.55-66
- F Deconstructing the Underclass p.67-72

### **II. Becoming American**

- Week 3 M Who is an American p.84-91, Is This a White Country or What p.92-99
- W How Jews Became White p.100-114, Asian-American History p.115-117
- F Baiting Immigrants p.118-120, Five Myths p.125-127
- Week 4 M Part VI How it Happened p.370-377
- W Review for Test
- F **Test #1**

### **III. Economics of Class, Race, and Gender**

- Week 5 M Imagine a Country p.192-201
- W Class in America p.202-214, Who Killed the Middle Class p.215-219
- F **2 Resources Due**, Course Evaluation
- Week 6 M Family Struggles p.220-224, Persistent Racial Segregation p.228-233

- W The Wage Gap p.234-238, Welfare p.242-248, What Scholars p.249-253
- F Oppression p.146-149, Racism p.150-154

#### **IV. Inequality and the Individual**

##### **Week 7 M No Class, Fall Break**

- W Smells Like Racism p.154-164, White Privilege p.165-169
- F Many Voices, Many Lives p.255-257, Racial and Ethnic Minorities p.258-269

##### **Week 8 M On Being South Asian p.270-276, Then Came the War p.277-283**

##### **W Resource Paper Due**

- F An Ethnic Trump p.284-286, TV Arabs p.286-288, The Circuit p.288-291

##### **Week 9 M Suicide Note p.308-309, Pursuit of Happiness p.310-311, Blacks and Hispanics p.315-318**

- W The Myth of the Latin Woman p.292-297, Aria p.297-305, Arturo p.306-308

- F Pigskin, Patriarchy p.325-328, He Defies You Still p.328-333

##### **Week 10 M With No Immediate Cause p.334-336, When Street Harassment 336-338, The Triangular Tube 338-339**

- W We Are Who You Are p.339-345, Requiem for the Champ p.356-359

- F C.P. Ellis p.359-368

#### **V. Maintaining Hierarchies**

##### **Week 11 M Self-Fulfilling Stereotypes p.452-458**

- W Review for Midterm

- F **Midterm Exam**



Week 12 M Failing at Fairness p.503-509  
W Anti-Gay Stereotype p.458-464  
F Media Magic p.510-549

## **VI. Creating Solutions**

Week 13 M In-class Exercise

W **Test #3**

F Course Evaluation

Week 14 M **Journal Due**

W **No Class, Thanksgiving Break**

F **No Class, Thanksgiving Break**

Week 15 M **Paper Due, Presentations**

W Presentations

F Presentations

Week 16 M Presentations, **Last Day for Extra Credit**

W Presentations

F Review for Final

Final Exam Information

## Suggested Readings

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